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# The Development of the Femme Fatale on Stage as Seen in the Works of Jesse Lynch Williams and Edna St. Vincent Millay

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FEMME FATALE ON STAGE AS SEEN  
IN THE WORKS OF JESSE LYNCH WILLIAMS AND EDNA ST.  
VINCENT MILLAY

By

Hillary MacArthur

Bachelor of Arts  
Roanoke College, 2006

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Accepted by:

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## **Dedication**

To all the women who have ever been called a Femme Fatale. Own it.

## **Abstract**

The Femme Fatale in the United States developed from certain characteristics represented by the New Woman movement of the 1920's. Jesse Lynch Williams and Edna St. Vincent Millay capture the identifying factors of what a Femme Fatale is and should be. This paper will explore the differences and similarities in the images of the Femme Fatale and New Woman, and discuss how those differences are related to origins of the image of the New Woman.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **DEVELOPING THE FEMME FATALE**

Lou Reed, lead singer of The Velvet Underground, said it best when he wrote, “Here she comes, you better watch your step/She’s going to break your heart in two, it’s true/It’s not hard to realize/Just look into her false colored eyes/She builds you up just to put you down, what a clown...” Thanks to the Film Noir movement of the 1940s, the term “Femme Fatale” has become synonymous with a mysterious and seductive woman whose charms captivate her lovers into bonds of irresistible desire, often leading them into compromising situations or even to their downfall. She desires to be in complete control of her future. She rejects marital duties and embraces a life of complete independence—often smoking, drinking, or engaging in sexual activity. The Femme Fatale uses her sexual powers to string the male protagonist of the film through a labyrinth of lies. In the 1940s, the archetype of the Femme Fatale flourished in contemporary pop culture with the introduction of Film Noir. This woman has become a staple of the film genre, and she represents the liberation and power gained by females throughout the Second World War: she is sexy, duplicitous and often ruthless. Lou Reed was trying to warn future victims of her when he wrote *Femme Fatale* in 1967. The Femme Fatale has been the subject of not only of hundreds of songs such as Reed’s own

Femme Fatale, Run Around Sue by Dion, and Wicked Game by Chris Isaak, but also of countless stories. The Femme Fatale in the United States developed from certain characteristics represented by the New Woman movement of the 1920s. Jesse Lynch Williams and Edna St. Vincent Millay capture the identifying factors of what a Femme Fatale is and should be in their dramatic works. I will explore the differences and similarities in the images of the Femme Fatale and New Woman, and discuss how those differences are related to origins of the image of the New Woman.

The choice to focus on Edna St. Vincent Millay and Jesse Lynch Williams is prompted by the opinions expressed by both playwrights in their personal lives towards the idea of marriage and traditional gender roles. Marriage itself is not the priority in their plays, but more importantly developing a relationship based on true love, as opposed to socio-economic factors. Millay's heroines again and again reject traditional gender roles, which is important in that she herself was often referred to as a "Femme Fatale". Male playwright Jesse Lynch Williams believed that a marriage of convenience was akin to legalized prostitution and went against the sanctity of what marriage should and could be (Williams, *Is Why Marry a Katy-Did Comedy?*).

The Femme Fatale is an archetypal woman whose evil characteristics cause her to either unconsciously bring destruction or consciously seek vengeance (Miller 89). The term Femme Fatale first emerged after the release of the 1912 silent film of the same name. Although the female heroines of Millay and Williams are not what one would typically associate with the term Femme Fatale, their behavior patterns and attitudes fit the character type. The heroines of Williams and Millay exemplify the traits true to the New Woman, who is a direct corollary of the Femme Fatale, and on which Hollywood



would later the base “the dangerous woman.” When stories are told warning against the Femme Fatale, these tales are geared towards shaping or reinforcing traditional gender roles and condemning certain female behaviors. The Femme Fatale has become a cautionary figure. And although the characters written by Williams and Millay are more often labeled the “New Woman” they often offer insight into the development of the Femme Fatale and the attitudes against her in a male dominated society. The heroines of Millay and Williams were independent, proud, smart and witty. These women might not always know what they wanted, but they knew what it was that they didn’t want and marriage was typically what they were running from. Williams and Millay both believed they were writing for an audience ready to embrace the idea of a more liberated woman in society, but it would not take long for Hollywood to manipulate the “New Woman” movement from something positive into something much more sinister.

### **NEW WOMAN VS. FEMME FATALE**

Because the New Woman was an influence on the Femme Fatale, and in order to understand exactly what changes women were going through at the time that Williams and Millay were writing, it is important to understand the New Woman movement. The New Woman movement was a societal movement that started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The figure of the New Woman cleared the way for the Femme Fatale by allowing women to assert their independence from men. So what is a New Woman?

The New Woman movement sought the emancipation of women as human beings by portraying them as more than “sex beings”- only useful for procreation and taking care of the home. By the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Feminists wanted to be able to have the same

rights as men in respect to their behavior, and in terms of exploring their own sexuality. This would make it possible for women to be loyal politically and ideologically to their own sex; and to expand the concept of womanhood while proclaiming the variability of individuals within a sex. This term New Woman was developed to encompass the women who pushed against the limits that had been set by the male dominated society of turn of the century United States.

The rise of the number of women in the workforce prompted both men and women to re-examine the role of women in society and especially their expectations of proper public behavior for women. Gender was a dominant theme in the first part of the twentieth century, and most dramatists responded to its presence (Newlin 1). Many dramas at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century look at the expectation that love and marriage mean narrowly defined gender roles. Gender is one of the universal dimensions on which status differences are based. Unlike sex, which is a biological concept, gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow (Kearl). The most prominent change was an increased presence of women in the public arena. Whereas the lives of most nineteenth-century women tended to revolve around home life, modern women ventured into jobs, politics, and culture outside the domestic realm. The progress being made in technology and the increased demand for workers in the years leading up to and during the First World War required that women venture into the work place in order to keep up with the needs of a larger work force. Conservative forces in society, including churches and such groups as the Ku Klux Klan, vehemently opposed women's new roles (Ohio State University).

Although many women participated in expanding women's public roles, women accepted and pressed for change in varying degrees. The symbol of the New Woman was a conglomeration of aspects of many different women from across the nation who lived between the 1890s and the 1920s. Among them were glamorous performers, female athletes, "working girls" employed in city factories and rural textile mills, middle-class daughters entering higher education and professions formerly closed to women, and reformers involved in women's clubs, settlement houses, trade unions, and suffrage (Ohio State University). The timing of the New Woman movement is extremely important. In the years surrounding World War I, many plays emerged touching on the theme of a New Woman trying to maintain her independence while still trying to express love for a man without compromising who she is. These plays also manage to highlight the double standard that lies between the old and new concepts of womanhood and attitudes towards marriage and family. The New Woman sold the idea of "you can have it all", but the reality was that something- either independence or desire for family- would be sacrificed.

Millay and Williams were both contemporaries of Rachel Crothers (A Man's World 1915), Susan Glaspell (The Outside 1917) and Alice Gerstenberg (Overtones 1915) all who are known for their works depicting daily life for women, including The New Woman.

Gerstenberg's 1915 play Overtones focuses on the inner struggle for women to behave as society expects them to. It is a classic struggle for Harriet and Margaret to suppress their "primitive" selves (Hetty and Maggie). The term "primitive" is employed here to describe the raw emotional state that each woman has inside of her and is expected to suppress. It is this inner struggle that creates the drama of a New Woman.

Each woman has these two sides to her personality- her cultured self and her primitive self. Society expects her to always embrace her cultured side and reject the primitive, however a New Woman and a Femme Fatale will always lean towards her base emotions and let her wants and desires guide her. Harriet and Margaret both secretly want the life the other woman has; Hetty and Maggie verbalize these desires and are verbally abusive with each other as their cultured selves exchange compliments and subtleties in order to wound the other. Overtones reflect the importance of the choice of words but also the importance of appropriate social behavior of the time. When the two primitive sides scream at one another “I’m going to rob you- rob you,” (Gerstenberg 217), that might not seem socially acceptable even by today’s standards. However, it reflects the inner desires of both women.

The New Woman is regarded as a “psychological type” who can be seen as a complex and socially influential force. She has deep-rooted internal conflict regarding female heterosexual desire and love (Rotkirch 137). Alexandra Kollantai described in her essay “The New Woman” the birth of a female subject- a woman gradually transformed “from the object of tragedy of the male soul into the subject of an independent tragedy...” (Rotkirch 139) According to Kollantai, the New Woman is single because she is professionally and emotionally independent, no longer defined through her relation to man:

[I]t is a wholly new... type of heroine, hitherto unknown, heroines with independent demands on life, heroines who assert their personality, heroines who protest against the universal servitude of woman in the State, the family, society, who fight for their rights as representatives of their sex. “Single women”- that is how this type is increasingly often defined. In the most recent past the main feminine type was the “spouse,” the woman as a resonator, a

supplement, an appendage. The single woman is least of all a “resonator,” she has ceased to be a simple reflex of the man. She has a singular, inner world, full of general human interests, she is independent inwardly and self-reliant outwardly... (Rotkirch 140)

The New Woman can be described by three main characteristics: 1) she is no longer defined solely by her feelings, (whether they are desire, adoration, or jealousy), 2) she makes high demands on her partner, and 3) she expects him to respect her freedom and her work. (This can reflect the idea that even a married woman can adopt a “single” mindset if she thinks and travels independently from her male counterpart.) The New Woman is also proud of her sexuality and will be sexually active (Rotkirch 140). The development of these traits comes from the rejection of the characteristics of idealized womanhood, which are presented to the woman from a very young age, as she watches her mother for the social and developmental cues that will shape her future. The New Woman however, rejects these behaviors and becomes more attracted to the masculine attributes that are presented by the father figure in her life or the men who surround her.

The New Woman has a strong positive relationship with her father and by gaining his acceptance she has overcome the lack of confidence that society has placed on her by constantly saying “no”. This woman will orient herself around men as she grows up and will probably have developed a less than positive view of other women. Women who have developed a close relationship to the masculine mode will relate to a male mentor or guide, but they may also have trouble taking orders from a man or accepting teaching from one (Murdock 30). She will reject a man who tries to control her or tries to make her feel inferior in any way. He might look at his behavior as trying to love and provide for her, but she will view his actions as controlling and will reject his advances in favor

of a partner who is more likely to treat her in every way as an equal. Although men might love her, the way in which that love is expressed by the male will influence how she responds to a suitor's advances.

The characteristics that define a New Woman and those that make up a Femme Fatale are remarkably similar. Both women desire independence, both challenge typical and defined gender roles in society, and both have taken control of their sexuality. However, they represent both the positive image and the negative image of the same model. Whereas a New Woman generally serves as the protagonist of a piece, a Femme Fatale generally plays the foil to the male hero. This is an important distinction because it allows for the Femme Fatale to be destroyed without becoming a martyr or gaining too much sympathy from the audience. The desired effect of her destruction is that the audience will believe that she had it coming. Whereas in the case of the New Woman, if she were to fail or have an unhappy ending, the audience would be alienated and feel sorry for her. Hollywood could not allow that to happen, because the male-dominated industry feared promoting sympathy for the New Woman. If they allowed for the New Woman to flourish on screen then that would allow for the movement to become even more widespread. Hollywood was able to teach the lesson that by following the example of the New Woman a woman could go down a bad path and ultimately destroy herself. But in reality the line between a New Woman and a Femme Fatale is much more blurry. It is important to note that Edna St. Vincent Millay and Jesse Lynch Williams were writing plays for the New Woman, as the Femme Fatale was not yet established. Hollywood took New Woman heroines and revamped their attributes into an image that

would suggest that the ideals the New Woman held important were dangerous to society and men in particular, creating the idea of the dangerous female.

### **WHAT IS A FEMME FATALE?**

The Femme Fatale is a beautiful woman who intentionally tries to lead men to their destruction; she is composed of equal parts beauty, cunning, and malice (Maxfield 1). In modern representations in literature and film, the Femme Fatale represents the most direct attack on traditional womanhood and the nuclear family. Her refusal to abide by the constructs of mainstream society creates an image of a strong, exciting, and unrepentant woman who defies the control of men and rejects the institution of the family. The Femme Fatale's unique power is her willingness and ability to express herself in sexual terms. A Femme Fatale has too much beauty, sex, and power while simultaneously having too little heart, mind, soul and emotion (Binias 38). She is a stereotype for dangerous female sexuality, exemplifying the female body as being a well-prepared arsenal ready to engage in a war with what is soon no longer the stronger sex. The Femme Fatale is the personification of how women can gain a certain level of equality within a male dominated society. Thus, she is a stereotyped version of all that is or can be considered negative in women. The Femme Fatale threatens the status quo and the hero because she controls her own sexuality outside of marriage. She uses sex for pleasure and as a weapon or a tool to control men, not merely in the culturally acceptable capacity of procreation within marriage. Her sexual emancipation commands the gaze of the hero and his desire to control or possess her. However, a true Femme Fatale will buck at the idea that she should belong to or be possessed by anyone.

The genre of Film Noir rarely portrays the image of a healthy marriage or a traditional nuclear family, and this leads the viewer to see the Femme Fatale as a logical product of her deviant environment. Yet in order to reinstate the status quo, the Femme Fatale must ultimately be punished at the end of the film. Her punishment is usually either death or captivity.

Today, the Femme Fatale still exists in popular film, literature and politics. This character is constantly evolving to represent the social views of the times and will continue to do so. She remains an example of female independence and a threat to traditional female gender roles. A Femme Fatale no longer has to die in order to keep the status quo, however, she must become submissive to a man- usually represented by her falling in love. If the Femme Fatale allows herself to be taken over by her lover, she gives him control over her, thus eliminating her power and reasserting his dominance. However, a New Woman did not have to sacrifice her independence.

### **FEMME FATALES IN FILM AND FEMINIST CRITICISM**

As I have argued, the “Femme Fatale” was a standard character in the genre of Film Noir. A film noir is typically an investigative thriller with a male hero and a dangerous woman, who is both the object of his investigation and his sexual desire. “The Femme Fatale was a hyper-sexed, cunning, and dangerous predator whose sexuality had to be contained by a man in order to save her from herself or to avoid disaster” (Reichert and Melcher 288). Eve, Lilith, Delilah, and Cleopatra are probably some of the most famous of the Femme Fatales featured on film and stage. Each had a sincere motivation for betraying the man she loved. Their transgressions are exaggerated and their cunning



manipulated into something sinister and cruel, when in fact there is very little actual proof that these women were cognizant that their actions would be seen as an absolute betrayal. The stories of those four women are engrained in our minds, often because of the representation they receive in art. But the key fact to take away from the Femme Fatale is that she is never exactly what she seems to be. There is a threat which is not legible, manageable, or predictable (Doane 1). The Femme fatale is a clear indication of the fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century.

No one person invented the Femme Fatale. The concept is rooted in and gained momentum through the work of artists, poets and critics who romanticized a worldview popularized in the 16<sup>th</sup> century of chivalrous romance and ladies ever waiting for a man to rescue (or marry) them. The image of the Femme Fatale is even evidenced in books like Beowulf, in which Grendel's mother serves as an antagonist to the heroic Beowulf. Some scholars have argued that the female characters in Beowulf, fulfill certain established roles such as hostess and peace-weaver, however Grendel's mother, challenges these identities and instead represents "monster-women." (Porter) In turn, this would set Grendel's mother up as a woman who is going to try to destroy Beowulf through temptation. Greek Mythology had sirens and the bible had Eve, any time there was a man who had fallen from grace the reason was a woman. But these women had to be punished and women needed to be kept down in order to maintain stability- or else heroes could never succeed and the world would be in chaos. The most famous example is undoubtedly Eve. Eve's deception condemned successive generations of women to obey man's rule; her redemption was through the pain of childbirth. While her character

evolved from that of dupe to seductress, two things remained: she sought knowledge and led man astray (Menon 18). However, The Bible did not put forth the idea of Eve as a femme fatale who cause mankind's downfall through her voice and sexuality- that was the work of successive theologians (Menon 18).

By the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, because of the ever-growing importance of industry, the roles of women began to change. Women slowly began to find work outside of the home, although at a significantly lower pay grade than men. The increasing growth of the fields of design, publication and technology in the middle of the nineteenth century caused the image and idea of the Femme Fatale to be developed and spread throughout the country (Allen 185). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, designers outfitted women in clothing that was more provocative, publications created the characters, and technology allowed for people to receive the Femme Fatale stories faster and with easier access. Society responded because of the fascination with the idea that evil is always more fun than virtue. The image of the Femme Fatale was present in art and on stage with characters like Carmen, Salome, and Venus. The Femme Fatale survived past the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to become the vamp of the 20<sup>th</sup> cinema.

The term Femme Fatale is problematic. The stereotype has come to be known as an archetypal woman whose evil characteristics cause her to either unconsciously bring destruction or consciously seek vengeance (Menon 4). There is no single clear Femme Fatale, as the term has too broad of a definition and allows for a constellation of types, all of which have a connection to Eve- they sought knowledge and led man astray. The use of imagery is extremely important in how this stereotype developed and has become ingrained in today's culture. The definition of the Femme Fatale as unconsciously

causing destruction or consciously seeking vengeance, loosely addresses the issue that any female can be a Femme Fatale at a given moment, whether she means to or not. By examining images of what could be called inherently feminine qualities (nature), but also as determinants of expectations (culture), Hollywood was able to create a broad spectrum for how to interpret a dangerous woman.

The cinematic vamp is in essence a Femme Fatale for beginners. She is much less complicated than a true Femme Fatale. A vamp is a woman who sets out to charm or captivate others from a dishonest or disreputable place by using her sexual attractiveness as her advantage. A Femme Fatale is much more cunning and her actions are usually more complicated. Just as a caged bird or animal will fight to get free, a Femme Fatale will fight to get what she wants no matter what the cost. A vamp is shallower and less likely to develop an emotional attachment to her “victim” or male counter. Theda Bara popularized this image with her barely-there costumes, smoldering eyes, and the fact that her studio billed the actress as “The Serpent of the Nile”, even though she had never been to Egypt, let alone been born there. Although less than a handful of her work remains intact, her reputation as “the woman with the hungry eyes” (the title of the documentary on her legacy) implies that she evoked the sensation of wanting more than she had, and she would fight at all costs to get what she wanted or deserved. What makes Theda Bara so important to the development of the Vamp and Femme Fatale is not simply her film legacy but more importantly how the Hollywood Studio system ran her publicity. She was told to discuss the occult and mysticism in interviews. The studio developed a mysterious and exotic (albeit fake) upbringing for her, and finally put her in costumes so scandalous that the Production Code introduced in 1930 banned similar outfits in

productions. She became best known for playing the vamp, as Hollywood wanted, despite her own attempts to avoid typecasting by playing wholesome heroines. She did not want to play the vamp and her career suffered for it.

The most essential element of feminist analysis of the femme fatale seems to still focus on men: the attitude is that it is always men who have a problem and that problem always comes down to women. However, the Femme Fatale manages to cause problems for feminist critics as well as the men they haunt. A Femme Fatale challenges a man. Her refusal to be narrowly defined as a mother or wife fights against the natural male desire for control. The fact she is unpredictable is the critical problem the Femme Fatale causes for feminist scholars. The Femme Fatale has an attractable quality of mystery, in that she almost always escapes being perfectly and neatly defined. Feminist literary critics recognized the need to separate fact and fiction in discussing the femme fatale. Hollywood increased the visibility of Femmes Fatales in film as an expression of what they were seeing socially, as women were beginning to declare their sexual and political freedom (Allen x).

Hollywood took control of the Femme Fatale in order to manage the fears and anxieties about the changing roles of women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Femme Fatale is a representation of the fears surrounding the loss of stability, which is the result or reaction to or rebellion against hundreds of years of female repression. The Femme Fatale is not a symbol of feminism but rather a symptom of male fears *about* feminism (Doane 3). This is why the Femme Fatale needs to be reclaimed by authors sympathetic to women and seen as a tragic heroine/victim as opposed to the villain.

Female characters of earlier Hollywood screwball comedies and studio musicals reaffirmed social values through marriage; the Femme Fatale was the Hollywood studios way of affirming that going against tradition would be disastrous for a woman and for the men around her. Film Noir created the Femme Fatale image of a woman with a peek-a-boo bang haircut and a well-tailored skirt leading the hero to certain doom. She is the embodiment of the male fear of loss of control, of will, of identity. In Film Noir, both the private detectives and the Mafioso adhere to an ideal of masculine toughness. Attraction to a woman threatens men's ability to adhere to the code; it calls forth tender emotions that undermine toughness (Maxfield 4). The male protagonists seem to have a sense of exactly what society expects of them as men, and allowing themselves to be led astray or manipulated into behaving in a way that displays any contradiction of that is perceived weakness. Giving into their emotions is a violation of what these men expect of themselves and of what they believe society expects of them.

The conflict within all the male protagonists of Film Noir is between the desire to abide by the male code and the desire to give in to their emotion usually for the sake of sexual gratification. The Femme Fatale is "deadly" because she preys upon the man's sense of what he is or should be. More than the actual female herself, the real threat is actually emotional dependency that the man might begin to feel towards the woman. It is not actually women who are to blame for the destruction of man but rather the male idea of self-sufficiency itself because it is self-destructive. The Femme Fatale is actually only a catalyst; in the end it is the men who are destructive to themselves (Maxfield 14). These men of Film Noir love more intensely because they have denied their emotions for so long. It also makes their heartbreak that much greater if they are denied by the object

of their affection. These men live their lives expecting women to give in to them, and when a woman rejects them, the man breaks down.

However, the Femme Fatale is nearly as afraid as a man to give herself over. The heroines in Millay and Williams's work rejected men in order to develop an independent identity separate from a man. This is where the role of motive needs to develop for the Femme Fatale. Is she working to destroy men? Is she trying to be a free bird? Does she want it all?

The Femme Fatale does not have a single, simple motive. Each character in every play, every song, or poem has a specific mission or goal, (although ultimately, she is searching for her own happiness). The steps which a Femme Fatale or New Woman may take to get to that final goal range from murder to marriage, depending on the genre. If she succeeds- then it is a comedy about the New Woman; if she fails in her mission, the piece is usually considered a tragedy, and she is considered a Femme Fatale.

Dominance and control are key issues in Film Noir, and thus in the Femme Fatale. The struggle between the sexes as to who is really in charge is a major theme. In John Huston's 1941 remake of The Maltese Falcon, starring Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor, the issue of dominance is extremely important. Two myths are central to Dashiell Hammett's book and in turn to Huston's film. One is the myth behind the legend of the Maltese falcon and the second is that of "The Tarnished Knight" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (the beautiful ungrateful woman) (Maxfield 15). In the legend of "The Tarnished Knight" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", a knight is distracted from his mission by a beautiful woman who lures him into danger- both moral and physical. The male and female often have a similar relationship in Film Noir. How the male reacts to

temptation often determines his fate and not just his triumph over evil but also his survival (Maxfield 15).

What The Maltese Falcon, succeeds so well in doing is emphasizing that in the absence of social, political, or economic control, women are able to control men through their emotions. It is a fact that men will do things for a woman they desire sexually that they might not generally do for others. Therefore men can be led by female seduction to act in a way so contrary to their self-interests that they allow themselves to be destroyed. Brigid O'Shaughnessy knows exactly what deadly game she is playing with Sam Spade. When he confronts her with, "Haven't you tried to buy my loyalty with money and nothing else?" and she responds with, "What else is there I can buy you with?" She knows he is going to kiss her and he does. The scene shows that her sexuality has enticed him to the point where he is not thinking clearly about the case, or is willing to sacrifice it for her. However, in the end he turns her in to the authorities. Sam turns her in because all of him wants to let her go and that the only way to accomplish that was to do something Brigid would not expect. He believed she expected him to let her walk, just as she counted on the other men she manipulated to get what she wanted. He is afraid that if he gives in to her sexual desirability, he will become a sap for her just like the other men in the film who fell under her spell and suffered deathly consequences. It is not Brigid herself who threatens Spade so much as it is his "love" for her, because it is love that makes him vulnerable; it threatens the dominance he strives to achieve in all of his relationships. If Brigid doesn't fall, Spade will experience a fall into submissive dependency (Maxfield 23). So what is the Maltese Falcon? According to Sam Spade, it is the stuff that dreams are made of. However, these dreams actually symbolize the

destruction of happiness and have no positive effects on the characters of the film. In order to keep his dream of dominance, Sam Spade had to suppress his emotions and deny a significant part of himself (all of himself in regards to Brigid). In the end he is left with the Maltese Falcon, a statue, while the thing he most desired is gone. But the statue remains as a reminder of his ultimately valueless pride (Maxfield 25).

However, Brigid O'Shaughnessy is the ultimate Femme Fatale in that she is seemingly unworthy of any man's love. She is the stereotypical Femme Fatale: "The dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts men and brings about his destruction." (J. Place 35) Her decision to shoot Miles Archer at point blank range was an act in cold blood. Miles had done nothing to threaten her, nor had Floyd Thursby, the man she attempted to frame for the murder of Sam Spade's partner. It is evident that Brigid is dangerous when Guttman warns Spade about her. "Dangerous?" Spade asks while Brigid is in the other room making coffee- an ultimately feminine role. When Guttman replies with a "Very," it says everything about Brigid. It is significant because Brigid is regarded as dangerous even by those who are dangerous themselves (Maxfield 21).

Spade and Brigid are dangerous to each other, and neither shows the other their full hand. Spade is drawn to Brigid, not just because she is a beautiful woman but also because she is the darker version of himself. She gives in to her desires in the way that he suppresses his. She too does not want anyone to get the better of her and she will employ the most effective tools she has at her disposal to secure control, money and power. This tool for her is clearly her sexuality. However, when her charms are rebuffed by Cairo, she turns to violence. The scene in which Brigid and Spade work



together to beat up Cairo, displays the dark similarities between the couple and their basic impulses (Maxfield 21).

Essentially the Femme Fatale as an icon is derived from a male twist on a certain moment of feminist thinking. When second wave feminist critics turned their attention to film and popular culture in the 1970's there was a sense of an important and political critical language being forged (Hanson 215). It was formed out of a confluence of cultural theory and identity politics. The theoretical approaches that were being applied to film were being taught through concepts of ideology, linguistics and psychoanalysis (Hanson 215). When these applications worked together with the need to inflect these approaches for a feminist critical practice identifying the Hollywood studio system as a male dominated mode of production that reproduced a narratives depicting the histories of women's cultural oppression, the primary project then was to evolve feminist interpretative strategies that could secure women's place in cinema (Hanson 215).

So how was the image of the Femme Fatale formed in Hollywood? By exaggerating stories of deadly beauties like Eve, Lilith, and Delilah, who had all been stereotyped as deadly women for years. There are plays, operas, ballets, paintings, and literature all predating film that paint these women as progressively darker versions of themselves the closer one gets to modern day interpretations. The thing those four women had in common was somehow a man was either not present or had not succeeded in his respective quest or mission. Ann Kaplan referred to the development of the Femme Fatale in her 1978 collection of essays, Women in Film Noir, as being a figure of resistance. This reiterates the idea that since this woman is resisting traditional gender

roles and is behaving in a manner that threatens male dominance- she must be destroyed. For Hollywood it makes sense to cast a beautiful charismatic woman who epitomizes strength, beauty, and brains and ultimately have her destroyed. Her destruction would again reassert male dominance.

Hanson in her essay, The Big Seduction: Feminist Film Criticism and the *Femme Fatale*, makes the following connection between Film Noir and the Femme Fatale: “In the same way as ‘Film Noir’ is a term and concept that is retrospective and reconstructed, so, too, is the critical formation of the Femme Fatale as formed within distinct feminist approaches to film. Tracing some of the cultural archetypes that precede the cinematic Femme Fatale shows that the fatal female is inflected in ways that, while they share thematic similarities, are distinctly culturally and historically specific.” (Hanson 217) This idea that the characteristics that were being displayed by Femme Fatales on screen reflected what was happening culturally and historically in America at the time, is extremely fundamental in understanding why women were being viewed as a threat to the male dominance of Hollywood. Women were slowly gaining more power outside the household. They were able to control their own livelihood without having to rely solely on a man. Women were able to make a living and life for themselves outside of the home. Men would see this as an assault on the traditional gender roles, which would upset the traditional balance of power. Hollywood was putting down the efforts of women to be taken seriously as something besides a mother or homemaker. Roughly twenty years after the New Women movement began, Hollywood began to fully accept her, but while allowing the New Woman to exist, Hollywood felt the need to control her. The New Woman threatened what men felt women should be and were viewed as a threat to the

masculine code. The result was the representation of a woman who ultimately brings about her own destruction by being smart, strong, sexually active and beautiful.

It is not the inevitable death or destruction of the Femme Fatale that the audience remembers, but rather the woman's strong, dangerous, and exciting sexuality. Because of the highly stylized nature of the demise or end of the lesson, it often takes a back seat to the image of the erotic, strong, unrepressed (nonetheless destructive) woman. (J. Place 48). However, because the line between Femme Fatale and New Woman is so thin, the heroines seen in pieces about the New Woman often behave in the same manner as a Femme Fatale- playing upon the man's desire for her, seen directly in Williams's Why Marry?, Why Stay Married? and in Millay's works The Implacable Aphrodite, The Same Boat, and several of her other pieces as well. These will be explored in depth later on.

## **CHAPTER 2: JESSE LYNCH WILLIAMS**

### **WHY MARRY?**

Arthur Pollack, a New York drama critic of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, recognized the rise in female protagonists as early as 1915 and proclaimed that it was the “era of the woman in drama” and later wrote that modern drama would be drawn to the modern American woman because, “Some of her adventures in the realm of progress serve only to lead her up blind alleys; others end in enlightenment; but all, or nearly all, are dramatic. That is the point that interests the dramatist...Her gropings for truth and light occasion innumerable conflicts of will and ideas, numberless contrasts of character and ideals. And in conflict and contrast, or course, the playwright revels.” (Pollock 105) Although Pollock was very cautious in commenting on the women in American society, he noted that women as dramatic characters had already assumed a new strength and importance (Stephens 185). Pollock recognized that women could embody more than one ideal and did not have to fit into a predestined stereotype. But the statement that her adventures are always dramatic, allows for a woman to become a more important character on the stage, and makes her journey in discovering who she is and what she represents, just as fascinating as that of a man.

In light of this information, it is not surprising to find that the first Pulitzer Prize for drama went to a play that concerned the New Woman. Jesse Lynch Williams was born in 1871 in Sterling, Illinois, and later studied at Princeton. In addition to his plays,

Williams wrote many news articles, short stories, and novels. His play, Why Marry? was originally titled And So They Were Married? and earned Williams the first Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1918.

As a writer of high comedy, Jesse Lynch Williams ranks among the most significant playwrights of the twentieth century. Why Marry? And Why Not? Are “subtle studies of the institution of marriage, written without bitterness or any trace of morbidity, and satirizing false ideals while preserving necessary human illusions” (Williams, Mitchell and Dunsany ii). Williams, being a playwright and not a sociologist, proposes no solution in his plays. He simply presents a group of well-bred Americans engrossed with their marital problems.

When Why Marry? was first performed, the reviews suggested that it was not only an intelligent and honest look at social institutions, but also a good defense for the “New Woman” (Stephens 185). The theme of the play is freedom, namely in the form of love. Williams refers to this as free love (Williams, *Is Why Marry a Katy-Did Comedy?* 1).

In an article for The New York Times, in February of 1910, Williams wrote:

For my part, I thought I was writing a comedy, not propaganda, and that my moral was not immoral at all. In fact, I should say that my message is a warning against, not an argument for, what is usually meant by “Free Love.” .... For example in the short space of time since beginning work on this play, four or five years ago, the proportion of divorces in this country has increased from one divorce to every twelve marriages to one divorce to every ten marriages- not to speak of those who ought to be divorced and aren’t. Our fundamental social institution, the most sacred and important relationship in life, has become a jest. (Williams, *Is Why Marry a Katy-Did Comedy?* 1)

Helen is a clear representation of the New Woman. She is assertive, maintains independent views, and expresses them in a direct, straightforward manner. She is the object of affection for the single men of the play, but she herself rejects love in favor of furthering her career as well as that of the man with whom she is not so secretly in love- Ernest. For example, in Act I she says, "Most men have but one use for us. If we get interested in anything but them it is unwomanly- they call it a fad." (Newlin 253) Ernest responds by saying that Helen is an exceptional woman because she has a mind like a man (Newlin 253). It is this attribute of Helen's that has attracted Ernest. Because she is smart and independent he found himself drawn to her from the day they met. She was a challenge to him, much in the way a *Femme Fatale* is a challenge to the men she attracts. Helen relied upon her brain instead of her sexuality to gain recognition. For Ernest in this instance, Helen's brain was infinitely sexier than any dress she might wear. This makes her his *Femme Fatale*.

Helen's reaction to the male perception of women is based upon her experiences and on how her younger sister has been brought up. Jean, Helen's younger sister, has been raised for the sole purpose of getting married and nothing else. Helen's statement about men reacting to her and other women's interests as fads is a reaction to the fact that the men she has had contact with disregard her and her opinions. Because she has a college degree in the field of science, a respectable job as a laboratory assistant, and her own income, she is the epitome of a new woman; her interests lie outside the realm of love, marriage, and family. She places more emphasis and desire on her career and education than she does on the pursuit of a romantic alliance. She admits to being in

love but she avoids marriage because it would stall her research. The work she does as an assistant is thought to be boring by the men she works with and they refuse to do it, but because she is eager to prove herself and her desire to do something important, she does her work and is excited by it. The advances the team has made might not have been made if it weren't for her.

These characteristics contribute in a major way to Helen being a prototype of the New Woman on stage. She even refers to herself as such in Act 1 "Jean is a true woman. I'm only a New Woman...Ah, yes, my life's a failure. I haven't trapped a man into a contract to support me." (Williams, *Why Marry?* 242) Even in this isolated statement, Helen's sarcasm is clear. The New Woman is characterized as a woman who pushes against the values and limits of a male dominated society, and Helen recognizes that her desire for a career and education conflicts with the expectations of society that she enter into a marriage and motherhood. She does not believe that she needs a husband in order to have a successful and happy life. Although certain aspects of Helen's character (her dialogue, her nondomestic role, her rejection of marriage) attest to her independence and her status as a New Woman, the plot of the play places her within the traditional confines of a love story in that the incidents are built around the love relationship which develops between Helen and Ernest Hamilton, the doctor with whom she works at the Baker Medical Institute (Stephens 185).

The most radical aspect of Helen's character is that she conscientiously shuns the institution of marriage. She especially feels that modern, middle-class marriage represents a barrier between two people instead of a union, and that by getting married a couple will actually grow apart instead of together. In the second act Helen states: "In

the old days when they had interests in common, marriage used to make men and women one, but now it puts them apart... He goes downtown and works, and she stays uptown and plays. He belongs to the laboring class, she belongs to the leisure class... Legally it may be a union but socially it's a misalliance . . . the only way to avoid spiritual separation is to shun legal union like a contagious disease. Modern marriage is divorce” (Newlin 268).

However, Helen is not against marriage as an institution. She is against the idea of entering into a marriage of convenience or marrying for the sake of being married. She acts as the voice for Williams’ own opinion of marriage. In his response to critics Williams referred to marriage as the most “sacred and important” relationship in life (Williams 1918, 1). Helen echoes this sentiment by saying, “They make what ought to be the holiest and most beautiful thing in life the most horrible and dishonest. They make me hate marriage- hate it!” (Newlin 245). Although Williams thought that he was writing a comedy, at least one critic considered the ending of the play to be tragic (Williams 1918, 1) The judge tricks Helen and Ernest into matrimony, even though the couple is devoted to each other and plans to be together without a marriage license. A couple that decides to spend their life together without being married is acceptable by today’s standards, but in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was blasphemous. The decision to forego matrimony was the most practical decision for both Ernest and Helen, however, in that it allowed them to continue to do research without being hindered by the expectations and duties required to make a traditional marriage work. Ernest was willing to marry Helen, but Helen felt that a marriage would only drive them apart. She views the wedding vows as a contract, “Contracts are not for those who trust- they’re for those who



don't" (Newlin 287). Helen wants Ernest and her family to understand that she loves and trusts Ernest, but going through a marriage, in her eyes, will make it appear as if she doesn't.

How can the union between two characters who love each other be tragic? Williams stated more than once in his rebuttal to critics that marriage should not be entered into lightly but neither should divorce. He believed that modern marriage needed to be founded on love and not on outside circumstances like marrying for power or money, and that both partners needed to consider their compatibility. The Judge in effect takes her rights away from Helen by tricking her into a marriage (despite it being a perfect match for her). He takes away her ability to decide for herself, thus negating her "New Woman" ideals and tendencies. By taking away her right to choose he also manages to negate her *Femme Fatale* status as well. Ernest got what he wanted, although he was perfectly willing to live the life that Helen wanted because he knew it would make her happy and he wouldn't lose her. But the forced marriage compromises Helen's own ideals and expectations, and risks upsetting the agreement that Ernest and Helen had entered into. If Williams wanted to remain true to his heroine, he would have allowed her to express some anger or annoyance at being tricked into matrimony (because she entered into the union under false pretenses), despite her love for her new husband. Instead the play cuts off with no lines from Helen or Ernest after they are married.

According to the ideals of the New Woman, she needs a partner who is going to challenge her and keep her on her toes, without crushing her independent spirit. This man needs to support and allow her the independence and right to reject the established norms of marriage and motherhood. The man who captures the New Woman's heart

must be confident to a fault, intelligent, funny, and almost as independent as his female counterpart. He should be highly educated and able to diffuse most tense situations with a quick joke. Another point that should be taken into consideration is the nature of Dr. Ernest Hamilton, the man whom Helen loves. Her attraction to Ernest seems logical and consistent since he is portrayed as one who has been "enlightened" on the question of women's equality. Ernest does not take a superior attitude toward women and is somewhat cynical toward those who do. Helen finds her match in Ernest (Stephens 191). She is drawn to his arrogance and charm, even though it is exactly the trait she criticizes him for:

Helen: You're about the most conceited man I ever knew!

Ernest: How can I help it when you admire me so? (Williams, *Why Marry* 94)

The relationship between Ernest and Helen represents the ideal relationship for a New Woman. Helen has rejected her traditional gender role and chosen to go after a career and college degree. The importance of Helen's choice to work as a scientist's assistant is important, because it enables her to do work that had previously been closed to her because of her sex. Although she could not receive formal credit for her discoveries, she was able to provide guidance in helping the research along and without her efforts certain discoveries might have gone unnoticed. "John: Why if it hadn't been for you, I should never have stumbled upon the thing at all". (Williams, *Why Marry?* 91) Rex, her previous suitor, was not strong willed enough to draw her affection. Rex is a man who has not been brought up to be anything but rich, and does not have the aptitude to compete intellectually with Helen. He therefore switches his favor to her younger sister who is the perfect model of the feminine. However, their union would be the epitome of what Williams was warning against, because they are only marrying for the sake of

marrying. Rex was deeply in love with Helen until Jean was thrust upon him, and even then only decided he was in love with her when Jean revealed she was in love with someone else. Rex and Jean represent the polar opposite of the union of Ernest and Helen. Jean does not love Rex, she is in love with another man, but agrees to marry him because he represents tangible security whereas the man she is actually in love with is still attending law school. Rex only wants Jean because she does not want him, and he is so possessive that he can't imagine anyone else touching something he views as belonging to him. Jean is caught between two worlds, she desires whole-heartedly to be like her sister and be independent from men, but she is without an education and therefore still reliant on the old ways of marrying into wealth and comfort. Theodore, the clergyman, refuses initially to marry Rex and Jean, because they do not love one another and their union would be an affront to the sanctity of marriage, which should only be entered into by two people who truly love one another. However, when Helen and Jean's brother John bribes him, Theodore agrees to preside over the marriage. The relationship between Rex and Jean is significant in contrast to the truly loving relationship of Ernest and Helen, but also in displaying the power that women have over men. In the opening scene, Rex is chasing Jean through the garden and she allows him to catch her, later she allows him to kiss her. Jean is representative of the *Femme Fatale* because she is tricking Rex through her game of tag, to give her what she wants: a marriage. Shortly after Rex proposes, Jean admits she does not actually love Rex and that she thinks playing "the game" with him may have been a mistake.

Both sisters have characteristics of New Women, although Helen is further along in her development than Jean. Jean for her part finally admits that she never had feelings

for Rex, which drives him to a point of near madness and an inability to make rational decisions, especially when he realizes the possibility of losing her to another man. Jean therefore not only represents the New Woman but more obviously a Femme Fatale. She denies his affection and brings about a surge of emotion from him. Upon learning that she is in love with someone else, Rex should have bowed out of the engagement, but instead his jealousy drove him to aggressively demand that she marry him. Jean agrees, but denies that she will ever fall in love with Rex. He vows to make her love him, without acknowledging that love is an emotion that cannot be controlled.

Helen's continuous rejection of Ernest's proposals drives both characters to volley back and forth between desiring to be married to rejecting the institution. Ernest never quite loses hope that Helen will come around, but he is not going to force her into a marriage if it will displease her. This does not weigh too heavily on their relationship but rather drives the family into a state of frenzy, which results in the tricked marriage. However, Ernest and Helen are not violating the importance of the ritual in that they truly love each other; they were choosing not to marry for the sake of their careers and rejecting an institution that they felt had become stale and abused. Choosing career over love for the well-being of others is not just a trait of the New Woman but is also representative of the Femme Fatale, in that she desires something for herself that may compromise her romantic relationship. A typical Femme Fatale might not have a career per se, but she is always in pursuit of the thing that will make her happy. For Brigid O'Shaughnessy it was the Maltese Falcon and for Helen it is a successful career. She is sacrificing family and "traditional values" in order to get what she wants. Helen's rejection of the marriage proposal was initially to further advance Ernest's career. It

becomes a battle of power for Helen. She does not want to give up her career for a man, but she is also aware that their marriage could negatively affect his career as well because he'd be losing her as his assistant in the lab. Both parties value their careers more than marriage. Upon discovering this common disinterest in marriage, Helen becomes more unabashed in teasing her family with the prospect of a union, even flirting more aggressively, most notably in the following passage and stage directions:

Helen: Now, then, be attentive to me. (He leans toward her rather shyly, abashed by her nearness. She makes eyes at him reproachfully.) Oh, can't you be more attentive than that? (She acts like a coquette and he looks into her beautiful eyes and while he is doing so she says with fascinating drawl) Now tell me all about anterior poliomyelitis? (Williams, *Why Marry?* 87)

Although this section is very clearly written to be comedic, it displays that Helen was fully aware of her feminine charms and what effect they could have on Ernest. She was using her sexuality not for evil or for the purpose of hurting another individual, but rather to gain information on something that was fascinating to her. However, when Ernest asks Helen to marry him by claiming that she is his world, Helen responds with "So this is what marriage means! Then I cannot marry you Ernest!" (Williams, *Why Marry?* 105) This is also in response to the fact he is going to give up his research in order to go into private practice so that he can provide for her, which would in turn mean that she too would have to give up the work she was doing.

She was acting in what she felt was his best interest (never mind that it would lead to her own advancement in the field of science). Although Ernest never breaks down and demands she marry him, he threatens to leave her once, but immediately regrets his hastiness and returns to her. His inability to stray from Helen is what makes her like a

Femme Fatale. Ernest will do anything- sacrifice his beliefs, desires, even his career to be with Helen. The Femme Fatale can and will drive others to make reckless and hasty decisions. But the ultimate sign that a woman is a Femme Fatale is her ability to get whatever she wants from a man, whether she makes any sort of sacrifice at all. Although the New Woman and feminism were making strides to reformat the rules of proper etiquette, society had not caught up. The plan for Helen and Ernest is that they would behave as any normal married couple might, but they would not legally be married and they would each still reside at their separate residences. They seemingly wanted to remain in an engagement without ever being formally married.

Helen is driven by many complex emotions. Her primary goal is to continue her rewarding career and the direct way to maintain that goal is not to marry Ernest Hamilton. Helen is the polar opposite of a traditional heroine in that her primary objective is to avoid marriage, whereas traditionally the woman would be *trying* to attain marriage to the man she is in love with. Since Helen is convinced that their marriage would mean the end of Ernest's vital, but poorly paid, experimental work as well as the end of their feelings for one another, she tries to repress her feelings for him. Helen remains committed to her goal throughout the entire play. Even after they have declared their love for each other, she retains her firm stand against matrimony since she feels sure it would mean their own "spiritual separation." (Stephens 191) Although the concluding events of the plot eventually overshadow all other aspects of the play, Helen does not waver from her original view. John Corbin of The Times, found fault with what he called the contrived circumstances of the play but described Helen as "a vivid and highly diverting comic character who manages to preserve the courage of her conviction-

rebellious against marriage to the end.” (Corbin 8) This consistency of motivation, especially when coupled with the ensuing scenes of inner conflict and struggle, indicates a certain stability and strength in Helen's character. Her strength of will and determination make her a strong representation for not only the New Woman of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but also for the evolving Femme Fatale type of modern theatre.

### **WHY STAY MARRIED?**

Why Not? (1922) is not a sequel to Why Marry? (1918) except in the way that it treats divorce with the same philosophic levity, superimposed upon a soundly reasoned protest against the existing divorce laws of the time and the accepted conventions surrounding the correction of marital mistakes. Jesse Lynch Williams wrote of his play:

A comedy of conventions. The two married couples in this play, ... too wellborn, well bred and well disposed toward one another and the world to think much about intellectual or social position... they are rather old-fashioned. They even go to church. Nevertheless they are all good. The incongruity of this atmosphere helps to make the fun of their fantastic predicament. For this is a comedy of human nature versus human institutions. (Williams, *Why Not?* 176)

Williams uses the character of Churchill as the voice of society in his play. He is a neighboring family member of Evadne and Bill, the wealthy couple in the play. Evadne and Bill are unhappily married, but have remained together because of their young son. Bill is a little slow in understanding that what he and Evadne have does not equal love. In fact the following exchange between the couple shows exactly how oblivious he is to the state of his marriage let alone his own unhappiness:

Evadne: No, still you don't understand. We never do understand each other, dear. Divorce is quite as detestable to me as to you. But if there were only some woman, some good woman, who could love you and bring out your best, not your worst but as there isn't (*Smiles sympathetic*)

*understanding.*) Why dear old Bill, (*Pats his arm.*) Do you think I'd turn my fellow victim loose, as things are now?

Bill: Well, that would put an end to your unfortunate marriage.

Evadne: Would that put an end to your unfortunate drinking?

Bill: Evadne, what a little thoroughbred you are! You mean to say, if I cared for some one else —

Evadne: Provided she were worthy of you.

Bill: You'd sacrifice yourself for my sake? Then you do love me.

Evadne: (*cheerfully*). Not in the least, dear. If I loved you, I'd scratch her eyes out. (Williams, *Why Not?* 182)

This exchange is extremely important in understanding the relationship between Bill and Evadne. They care about each other but do not love each other, because as Evadne says if she loved him, she would be jealous of another woman. The only way they will divorce is if one of them meets someone else. As it happens, they have hired a new Butler, Leonard, a rather talented but unsuccessful poet and his wife Mary as a new maid. In a twist of fate, Leonard was a former love of Evadne's, the couple only parted because he was so poor and she so rich. Similarly, Mary and Bill had been romantically linked years before, and had broken apart due to a quarrel over the church and women's suffrage. The marriage of Leonard and Mary is revealed to be a sham as well. Mary walks in on Leonard with a gun to his head, contemplating suicide. His reasoning was so that Mary and their young daughter could collect his life insurance. This is the moment where Leonard finally admits that he never truly loved his wife, and Mary expresses that she never loved Leonard either. Ultimately, both couples divorce, with Bill becoming engaged to Mary and Evadne becoming engaged to Leonard. This is much to the dismay of the close family friend, Churchill.

Churchill is described as “a successful family lawyer, a bachelor, elderly, worldly, baldheaded, and respectable- when watched, but he has a roving eye” (Williams,



Why Not? 179). Churchill believes that divorce is a disgrace and will bring shame upon the family. He believes that an unhappy marriage is better than the humiliation that a divorce can bring even when the divorce can bring about a much happier second union than the first. Churchill is the voice against the modern viewpoint on marriage and divorce. He rejects the idea of the “New Woman” in favor of traditional gender roles. When he hears of the arrangement made between the two couples, he becomes agitated: “Divorced? Not in our family. Oh, it's this sudden meeting after years — gone to their heads. Bill's always tenderhearted, Evadne's always romantic; but they're good — all of 'em are good; self-respecting, self-controlled, self-sacrificing. Nothing modern or selfish about any of them. I'll soon bring them to their senses.” (Williams, *Why Not?* 194). This exclamation is extremely important in understanding the characters of Leonard, Bill, Evadne, and Mary. Churchill truly believes that these characteristics that make them “good people” will allow him to appeal to their better judgment and call off the divorces. However, these are not enviable traits. Each character wants to be happy and married to the person they love and with whom they have been reunited. They do not wish to sacrifice their second chance despite what it means for their children (which is the only question that gets raised in their minds in relation to whether they are doing the right thing).

**Churchill:** Moreover, marriage is not for the selfish benefit of the individuals concerned, but for the social benefit of civilization, which is still more concerned. The family is a unit of the state, the fundamental institution of society. At any sacrifice, the family must be saved!

**Leonard:** Right. At any sacrifice the family must be saved. That's why we were driven to divorce. (Williams, *Why Not?* 197)

Churchill is more concerned about the appearance of civility and happiness for the sake of the children, whereas the parents actually have the family's best interest at heart.

The concerns that are raised about the current marriages is that Bill, already an alcoholic, will drink himself to death; Leonard will kill himself because he is worth more dead than alive (life insurance policy) but even after his death Mary and their daughter Molly will be left destitute and on the street. Evadne raises the point “Why should we all be miserable when we can all be happy?” (Williams, *Why Not?* 197) She implies that they can all be better people if allowed to go through with the divorce because in their happiness they can provide a better and happier future not only for themselves but for their children as well. Evadne also raises the point that Leonard will be able to provide a better life for Mary and his daughter Molly, because he would have to pay Mary alimony. If Leonard chooses the “right” second wife, they all could live quite comfortably. Bill is also extremely wealthy in his own right, therefore would also be well equipped to provide an extremely good life for Mary and Molly. Mary and Evadne represent two women who are extremely inclined to get what they want. Neither woman hides her dissatisfaction with her present circumstances and desires something that the other woman has- namely each other’s husbands. Their practicality combined with the heightened passions make them similar to the two women in Overtones, only without the double talk. By admitting what they want and need to be happy, Mary and Evadne embrace the New Woman and put aside the traditional idea of having to stay married for the sake of the family. They believe that it is for the family precisely that they both need to get divorces.

Although Mary and Evadne are not entirely pure representations of what a “New Woman” is, they are forward thinking enough to realize that in their lives, going through with a divorce will benefit them more in the future than staying in an unhappy marriage. They are not leaving the marriage and their children because they feel they are being

suffocated, losing their own identity, or even because the marriage was all that unhappy. Divorce is the course of action because they simply do not love their partners and believe by remarrying someone else they have a chance for love. If either couple had not been reunited with their past partners, Evadne and Bill, as well as Mary and Leonard, they would have probably stayed together. These women are not abandoning their children, for the children are viewed as a package deal- they go where the mother goes. Mary and Evadne do not have to sacrifice motherhood in order to be happy. Why Not? very easily could have been written as a tragedy in which the women had to choose between love for a romantic partner and love for their children. This would have been a false representation of the time however, because it would not allow for the shifting views of society to be represented. More importantly it would deny the truth that women were able to be successful in life and love after a divorce. A woman does not have to sacrifice motherhood or her children in order to be happy- she can have both. Divorce does not automatically mean that a person is ruined. The couples choose to reside under one roof, so that no one has to be separated from their child. Although this is not a normal arrangement, this was the best option for both families. The arrangement satisfies all parties and the children seem to be happy as well. Therefore Churchill's claim that the children would be affected negatively is unfounded. It goes even further when the children express adamantly that they would rather have happy parents in loving marriages, than have their parents back in the original partnerships.

So how are Evadne and Mary Femme Fatales, if neither leads their husband or ex-husband into ruin? Evadne plays upon Leonard's romantic side, she appeals to the poet that he is and the past that they shared. She tells him she would have shared in his

poverty had he asked her the day he left her in the woods, and he says he ran because he loved her but she would not have known how to be poor and he could never ask her to make that sacrifice. Leonard makes rash and hasty decisions (contemplating suicide for money) and Evadne uses her feminine charm to bring him back to his senses. It is clear that they have a stronger effect on one another because they do truly love each other. They listen to one another. Mary couldn't convince Leonard suicide wasn't the answer, but Evadne could. A true Femme Fatale doesn't need to always convince a man into something bad, she just needs to convince him into her line of thinking, and that is exactly what Evadne does for Leonard- she sways him to her point of view time and time again. This is because despite the fifteen-year gap between their break-up and subsequent reintroduction, he never stopped loving her no matter how he tried to suppress his feelings for her.

Mary and Bill originally ended their relationship because they had different views on the church. Bill knew he was never going to change her from an Episcopalian to a Presbyterian, and she knew he was never going to make that change. However, both decided that they would rather be together than allow their respective faiths to keep them apart. When it came time for them to get married, they decided not to marry in a church but rather have the mayor marry them so as to bypass the argument that ended their relationship in their younger days. So how does Mary embody the new woman/ Femme Fatale? She has let her logic and sense guide her decisions and thus she appeals to Bill's more sensible and carefree nature. She encourages him to see his son at every opportunity as well as to succeed in his business. But the most important change that Bill made as a result of their union was his drinking. A barely functioning alcoholic, Bill has

reformed and put that energy into his business. Mary was also a staunch supporter of women's suffrage, another issue that Bill had laughed at her for fifteen years prior, however now that it had succeeded he realized how right she actually was. Just as a *Femme Fatale* can sway a man into agreeing with her viewpoint, she should be able to get him to make sacrifices for her as well. Although it is a fact that *Femme Fatale* translates into dangerous woman, Mary and Evadne are no threat to their husbands. But they are dangerous. They challenge Churchill's beliefs and understanding of marriage as well as a societal understanding of traditional marriage. He can't grasp the idea that they as women can be happy, have families, and be in love. However, Evadne and Mary are able to prove that they can have it all, but this idea continues to fluster and confuse Churchill. He is not used to being outwitted. Both couples upset his understanding of the traditional gender roles and status quo of men and women and the law. Although his downfall is not seen on the page, it is alluded to that Churchill suffers a nervous breakdown, which would be the downfall brought about by a *Femme Fatale* (Williams, *Why Not?* 213). Although Churchill is not a part of the romantic relationships, it is his downfall that creates much of the comedy in the play. However, it is Churchill who brings about his own downfall- not Evadne and Mary. The thin line between *Femme Fatale* and New Woman is formed partly by the definitions of comedy and tragedy. A comedy is defined a dramatic work that is light and often humorous or satirical in tone and that usually contains a happy resolution of the thematic conflict, whereas a tragedy is a drama or literary work in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, moral weakness, or inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances. The women succeed and the man who tries to bring

about their unhappiness is defeated, therefore this is a play about the New Woman, not the Femme Fatale. However, if the antagonist had succeeded and the women had failed to accomplish their goals, the play would be considered a tragedy.

Why Not? , Proves that women don't have to resort to murder or suicide in order to escape marriage. They can end an unhappy union on their own terms with a divorce. Evadne divorces Bill and marries Leonard, Mary divorces Leonard and marries Bill, and both couples make the decision to live in the same house in opposite wings so that all four people could be close to the children. Although this is an untraditional choice after divorce, it was the best of both worlds for the two families and no one had to sacrifice being near their child. It is unfortunate that the term Femme Fatale has been given a negative connotation as being something sinister. As can be seen in especially in the case of Eve, a Femme Fatale does not have to destroy the man she is with in order survive and be happy. Although Adam and Eve were not happy to be cast out of Paradise, they still had each other. The issue of sacrifice is a major theme to the Femme Fatale. She will ask her partner to sacrifice something he wants or loves in order to be with her, but a true Femme Fatale, if she loves her mate, will ultimately make a greater sacrifice for him if there is any chance he will truly suffer or be hurt.

## **CHAPTER 3: EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY**

### **WHAT LIPS MY LIPS HAVE KISSED: MILLAY AND GENDER ROLES**

The Femme Fatale is a common character type in folklore, myth, and legend. Often this woman will lead her lovers into compromising, dangerous, and deadly situations by captivating them with her extraordinary beauty and female charms. The heroines in Edna St. Vincent Millay's plays were not only beautiful, but the women were fiercely independent and intelligent. The male characters would fall in love with these women but the relationships were most often doomed to fail. The interactions between the sexes in the works of Edna St. Vincent Millay are in contradiction to traditional stories of knights in shining armor and the notion of chivalrous romance. The female protagonist in Millay's plays denies her feelings in order to protect other's happiness. Her rejection only spurs on the man's love for her and his inability to possess her drives him to the point that his obsession with her makes him incapable of rational decisions. By examining the female characters from three of Millay's better known plays- Aria da Capo, Two Slatterns and a King, and The Lamp and The Bell, the shift away from chivalrous romance will be clear.

Edna St. Vincent Millay was not one to shy away from her own sexuality. She would perform readings of her poetry in long silky dresses in order to appear as feminine and as sexual as possible. Since her poetry was believed to be autobiographical, it can

be interpreted that she herself understood her own sexuality in such a way that was traditionally only acceptable for men. At the time the understanding for most Americans was that men were naturally more aggressive, women naturally more passive, specifically in relation to sexual behavior (Wolfe 155). Although Millay would represent herself in an excessively feminine persona in performance, she countered this femininity with being willing to play the masculine role within her own personal relationships. Arthur Dubois believed that Millay insisted on being regarded as a woman playing an independent role in love. She wanted people to believe that she could be detached and analytical in love-having a “man’s attitude” (Brittin 8). Her indifference to traditional gender roles in her personal life is best exemplified through an incident she shared with Floyd Dell, one of her former lovers. Dell and Millay appeared late to a public appearance. Dell felt self-conscious about the situation and Millay simply stated, “*It really does not matter if everybody knew that we were in bed together*” (Milford 166). Edna St. Vincent Millay very clearly presented her image as that of a woman willing to challenge the sexual politics of her time (Wolfe 155). Her attitudes towards love and the situation of women were representative of modern views of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Millay embodied the humanism and radicalism of the World War I generation that set the tone for the 1920s (Brittin 8). Millay’s understanding and representation of female sexuality carry over into her dramatic works, demonstrating the shift away from traditional gender roles.

Millay first started writing drama while attending Vassar College. The theater had always interested her and she took part in an apprentice playwriting course where she completed three works. These early works explore the themes of honor and integrity, as well as the romantic ideals of love and friendship; themes that would follow Millay well



into her future dramatic works and into her poetry. Two Slatterns and a King, was produced in 1921 for the Provincetown Players. The theme of the play is what can happen when one makes too-rapid selection of potential romantic partners. Two Slatterns and a King, was often referred to by Millay as a moral interlude because it explores many conventions of morality plays such as personification- the central antagonist is personified Chance. The play is unashamedly a rendering of a Renaissance interlude, written completely in four-beat couplets. In the opening line of the prologue Chance refers to himself as “*a cunning infidel*” (Millay, *Three Plays* 3). Chance outlines exactly what is going to happen- the king will be made a laughing stock. In the course of the play the king decides that it is time for him to take a wife. However, he wants his future bride be the neatest maid in his kingdom, and that he will personally inspect each kitchen to judge for himself. The audience is then introduced to Tidy, a young woman who is the epitome of cleanliness and virtue:

*I am Tidy, I have been  
All my life both neat and clean.  
From my outside to my in  
Clean am I unto my skin.* (Millay, *Three Plays* 4)

But due to unforeseeable circumstances on the day of the king’s visit to her kitchen, Tidy appears to be a mess. The King passes on marrying Tidy because her kitchen is disorganized and dirty, after she chased a dog through mud when the animal stole a broiled duck, her pastries burnt, and a swarm of flies infested her little home. The King believed this to be her natural state because he judged her solely upon appearances. Instead the King chooses to marry Slut.

Slut introduces herself as a slattern, an untidy slovenly woman. She states very simply that:

*I spend my days in slovenly ease;  
I sleep when I like and wake when I please.  
My manners, they are indolent;  
In clutter and filth I am quite content.* (Millay, Three Plays 6)

She goes on to state how her kitchen is constantly dirty for she doesn't bother to launder her clothes or clean up her dirty dishes, let alone wipe up cream spilt from her cat jumping on the table. Slut is quite simply filthy. As chance would have it, on the day the King decides to inspect Slut's home, she got bored. In her boredom, Slut decided to clean her house for it was the only thing that she had never tried to do before. The King decides on the spot that he needs to marry Slut. The King, in his hurry to come to a satisfactory conclusion, misjudges the characters of both women. Chance leads him to take the hand of the utterly wrong person. It does not take the King long however to recognize his error in judgment. By that afternoon, after the wedding of the King and Slut, Tidy has cleaned herself up. The King learns that Slut is in fact the true slattern and Tidy was simply mistaken for one, leading to the moral of the story to not judge character too quickly.

Millay does not paint a romantic picture for marriage in this short one-act play. There is no element of romance or even of love. The king marries someone below him not out of love, but rather out of need. The King doesn't even want to marry, because he believes he could never endure a woman in his household. However, Chance changes his mind to drive forth the action. Millay's image of marriage is pretty grim as well:

*Slut: So here you dally whilst I sit at home!  
Never any more abroad shall you roam,  
But sit at home with me for the rest of your life,  
For I am your lawful wedded wife!  
King: Oh, woe is me, what a life will be mine!  
Slut: It is too late now to repine:  
Home with me you come for the rest of your life,*

*For Slut is your lawful wedded wife!* (Millay, *Three Plays* 13)

These few lines of dialogue make marriage sound as if it is more of a curse than a blessing. It is the King's fault that he was too hasty in his decision, but even if he had chosen Tidy, his indifference to marrying in the first place would have made the entire practice seem like a punishable offense instead of a happy occasion. The King never woos the women and the only positive characteristic he has to offer is that he is a king. Typically, marriage is portrayed as a happy occasion, but Tidy is quite happy to have escaped marrying the King. Tidy does not swoon in the last moments of the play when the King makes advances towards her. Tidy never declares love or even anything like admiration for him. She continues to be as she always was. Her life is not altered, whereas the King's obsession with finding a woman who he believes is neat and tidy drives him to make an irrational decision in marrying Slut.

Of all Millay's dramatic works *Aria da Capo*, is the best known. The play itself was written as a piece for the highly influential Provincetown Players. The highly stylized play presents two courses of time as separate plays that are acted under the umbrella of an overarching framing play (Atkins 78). It combines farce with a pastoral tragedy- together the two elements create a symbolic drama.

The action of the play opens with a harlequinade in which Columbine and Pierrot are seated at opposite ends of a table having dinner. Pierrot is constantly trying to drive the conversation. He controls Columbine in a way as to make her appear silly. He makes grandiose statements about who he is and what he believes in, however these statements often contradict each other. Pierrot goes so far as to say that he is a humanitarian and in the next line states that he hates people. Yet, the most interesting bit of dialogue comes

as a critique of theater in the beginning part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pierrot asks Columbine if she should like to be an actress, to which she replies that she can't act. His response is as follows:

*What's that to do with the price of furs? -  
You're blonde,  
Are you not? - You have no education, have you? -  
Can't act you underrate yourself, my dear!  
...  
I'll teach you how to cry, how to die.  
And other little tricks; and the house will love you.  
You'll be a star by five o'clock (Millay, Aria da Capo 5)*

The condescending attitude of Pierrot towards everyone and everything is necessary for the action that occurs later. The little dinner that Columbine and Pierrot are having is strangely interrupted by Cothurnus, a stage manager of sorts who tells them that he has grown impatient and that it is time for the next scene to come on stage. What follows is a strange telling of events as two shepherds, Corydon and Thyrsis, come onto the scene. The two men want to play a game, but Cothurnus corrals them into building a wall out of crepe paper. Cothurnus helps build the suspicion and animosity between the two former friends, until they are driven to murder. Once the two men are dead, Cothurnus slams shut a prompt book and walks off stage, only to have Columbine and Pierrot reappear. The couple has been bickering off stage throughout the shepherd's scene but when they return, they start their dinner scene much as it was first performed in the beginning of the play, not noticing the bodies that are still on stage. Columbine screams when she does finally notice the corpses. Pierrot orders that Cothurnus remove the bodies from the stage as they can't eat dinner with two dead bodies because the audience won't stand for it. Cothurnus responds simply "*Hide them from the house and*

*play the farce. The audience will forget.*” (Millay, *Aria da Capo* 31) After the merry couple hide the dead shepherds, they set forth to perform their scene without change or interruption.

After *Aria da Capo*, opened and began being performed around the country, Millay returned to it and included important character information to help clarify issues in the script. The character of Pierrot sees clearly into existing evils but is made cynical by them; he is both too apathetic and too indifferent to do anything about it. He has lost the belief that there is any beauty or romance left in the world, as his lines such as “*Moon’s just a word to swear by,*” suggests. Although his tone should come across warm and tender, his words are biting, to the point that Columbine should almost be aware of how much even the moon bores him (Millay, *Aria da Capo* 47). Columbine on the other hand is a woman who believes that men prefer women to be useless and exaggerated. Although she is pretty and charming, she is not bright. Often when Pierrot is speaking she does not understand what he is saying and she is not quite aware that he is making fun of her. When Pierrot does speak, Columbine listens to what he has to say dutifully and admiringly (Millay, *Aria da Capo* 47). The lack of romance and love in the relationship is a clear sign of the breakdown of a romantic relationship. There is no mutual respect, and the relationship is dominated more by Pierrot’s love of himself than his love for Columbine. Columbine, although she represents the female aesthetic, is not independent from her male counterpart and thus relies on him too heavily to be a *Femme Fatale* in the sense that Millay might have intended. Millay states in her notes that if Columbine were left on her own without Pierrot, she would be a domestic and capable person (Millay, *Aria da Capo*). Columbine has allowed herself to be treated badly out of

fear of losing her man. Fear is not romance, nor should it be a reason for a couple to stay together, and this relationship provides another example of the breakdown in romantic relationships within Millay's works.

The Vassar college Alumnae Association commissioned Millay to write a play for its fiftieth anniversary celebration on June 18, 1921. Millay was intrigued by the fairy tale "Rose White and Rose Red" and used the story as the basis for what would become the play, The Lamp and The Bell (Brittin 103).

The prologue sets up the story of widower king with a young daughter who is marrying a woman with a daughter; the two girls are to grow up as playmates and friends. Act I opens four years later and introduces the characters and the present situation after the king's remarriage. Bianca, the Queen's sweet daughter represents Rose White, and Beatrice or Rose Red, is the bolder more independent daughter of the King. The two girls have developed a deep and passionate devotion to one another. The action of the play is set into motion when the question is raised as to who will marry first and whether they will remain friends afterwards. Queen Octavia is concerned and does not think it natural that the two girls are always together, so she makes the decision to send her daughter away.

Four months later, two crucial love triangles are set up. Beatrice has fallen in love with the visiting King Mario, while Guido, a Lord who is in love with her, looks on. Beatrice has made it clear to Guido that she hates him, but this hatred only draws him to her. He persuades Queen Octavia to bring her daughter, Bianca, home, hoping she might marry Mario in place of Beatrice who is extremely independent.

Act III opens in the following summer. Bianca is preparing for her wedding to Mario, and asks Beatrice her opinion on the bride-groom. Bianca wants her dear friend's approval and makes the comment- "*I could not bear/ To wed a man that was displeasing to you*"- Beatrice responds with: "*You could not find/ In Christendom a man would please me more*" (Millay, *The Lamp and The Bell* 45). They are still devoted to one another, and the two make the following statements of how important the other is:

Bianca: *You are a burning lamp to me, a flame  
The wind cannot blow out, and I shall hold you  
High in my hand against whatever darkness.*

Beatrice *You are to me a silver bell in a tower.  
And when it rings I know I am near home* (Millay, *The Lamp and The Bell* 47).

Beatrice is a generous and understanding young woman, and she does not blame Mario for falling in love with Bianca. In a scene between Beatrice and Mario, it is discovered that before Beatrice could even tell Bianca of her romance with the king, Bianca had revealed by her first words that she loved him. Beatrice sacrificed her own love and chance at happiness, instead choosing to be happy in the love of her friend. Bianca proves her devotion in turn when on her wedding night Beatrice's father suddenly dies. Bianca sends her new husband away so that she may spend the night with Beatrice in her sorrow over losing her father.

Five years have passed between Acts III and IV, Beatrice became queen when her father passed away and has been injured while hunting. King Mario is now dead. Bianca is taunted by Octavia into going to see Beatrice since Beatrice did not come to her. When she arrives, Beatrice explains that she has been ill but asks her to leave. Bianca begins to believe what Octavia said about Beatrice loving Mario and in a misunderstanding, Beatrice tells how, after being wounded by thieves, she thrust her sword at a rider and killed Mario accidentally. Bianca rushes off and Beatrice faints. In the final act, Guido is

plotting to take over the throne. He is still in love with Beatrice. Francesca, a Lady in Waiting with whom he had an affair is still in love with him. Upon hearing that Bianca is ill, Beatrice starts to leave to be by her friend's bedside when she is seized by soldiers. Guido will let her go to Bianca only on the condition that she gives herself to him upon her return. She finally agrees:

*I wonder now that even for a moment  
I held myself so dear! When for her sake  
All things are little things!- This foolish body,  
This body is not I! There is no I,  
Saving the need I have to go to her!* (Millay, *The Lamp and The Bell* 92)

Bianca, in her fear that she will die before Beatrice comes to her, leaves a message that her two children now are Beatrice's and that all is forgiven. Beatrice enters a moment later and Bianca dies in her arms. It is then announced that Guido has died from being stabbed in the back, and Francesca drowned herself in a pool. It becomes apparent that Francesca overheard Guido's demand of Beatrice and was so overcome with jealousy that she killed him.

The construction of what was Millay's first full-length play, involves two triangles, each with two women and a man: (1) Francesca- Guido- Beatrice and (2) Beatrice- Mario- Bianca. In both triangles the rejected woman kills the man, although one killing occurs by accident, the other is deliberate revenge (Brittin 106). Beatrice is characterized as a fiercely independent woman throughout the script. She is taller than her friend, more given to initiative, quicker with a joke, better at sports, and smarter. These typically masculine characteristics make her appear as if she is neutral in her feelings towards Mario which falsely leads him to believe she had no need for love (Atkins 44). Bianca has a docility and fragility that are typically associated with



romantic heroines. Her apparent weakness is what Mario fell in love with. This shows Mario's lack of a sense of duty towards Beatrice. Duty is a key component of chivalrous romance. However, Beatrice is a key example of the modern *Femme Fatale* of Millay's works. Beatrice successfully sacrifices her own love and happiness for the sake of her friend; even to Mario she denies that she loves him. This not only puts an end to the idea of fairy tales needing to end with a "happily ever after" scenario for its protagonist, but the ideals of unselfish love and friendship are warmly but unsentimentally revealed at the core of the play (Brittin 106).

The shift in gender roles is an extremely important element not only in Millay's poetry, but in her dramatic works as well. She successfully painted a picture that the feminine ideal of perceived weakness would not bring happiness. In the case of Columbine, she was stuck in an unhappy relationship on the brink of emotional abuse. Bianca died an early death and never truly admitted or understood exactly what her dearest friend had sacrificed for her. The women who succeed in Millay's plays are the ones who are able to use rationality and display the typically masculine attributes of controlling their emotions and remaining calm and collected. The only moment where Beatrice comes close to losing her strength of mind is after she kills Mario, the man she loved from afar. Tidy is able to escape a foolish union to the King. Although a king might be able to provide a way of life she was not used to, a fool is still a fool no matter his station. She did not love him so there would seemingly be no reason for the marriage to take place. These women keep their feelings to themselves and come out ahead of the women who react in what can be deemed traditional feminine ways. The men seem to suffer even more so than the traditional females, as they end up murdered, accidentally

stabbed, or trapped in a loveless unhappy marriage. The men all made hasty decisions that were irrational and or impulsive, and for that they suffered the greatest consequence of all: a loss of freedom.

In Millay's one act, The Same Boat, a couple meets on a boat crossing the Atlantic to Europe. It starts simply as a boy-meets-girl scenario, however despite her attraction to Dick, Jacqueline keeps him at arm's length. This effectively makes him desire her even more. Her evasive and mysterious qualities draw him to her and he can't quite figure her out. Every sign she gives him is that she is interested, but she consistently manages to avoid his physical attempts at closeness, until giving in on the last night of their voyage. He assumes that her actions have been an attempt to keep her modesty and that she could control herself no longer. Until he asks:

He: It will always be one of the loveliest memories I have. And  
dear, - aren't you going to change your mind and let me  
see you in Florence?

She: No! No! I won't! I'm going to Florence on my honeymoon!  
I won't! I-

He: Oh my God- you, too? (Boyd 69)

This exchange between Dick and Jacqueline, who throughout the play are referred to as "he" and "she", is extremely necessary in showing that both men and women can behave immorally. However, she was better at behaving with an appropriate level of decorum and respect for her bedridden husband (the other spouses were both seasick). Dick wanted to continue seeing Jacqueline because she withheld emotion from him. Jacqueline chose to remain mostly faithful to her husband. Until the final lines she seems to be the perfect representation of a traditional female, Dick even mistakes that she is going to Paris for Fashion week and she fails to correct him. This scenario is one in which omission of the truth is considered lying. Both Dick and Jacqueline lied about

their reason for being on the same boat. He starts the dialogue in every scene, and even goes so far while talking alone says “Hateful girl! Wouldn’t look up if I dropped dead at her feet!” (Boyd 58), suggesting that he is aware that his attachment to her is much more intense than hers is to him. In the initial read it comes across as if she is a single woman, falling for a dashing man on a boat, but then once the reader knows the truth, her motives seem less clear and it appears she has simply been using Dick for companionship while her husband is sick and in so doing allows Dick to fall for her.

Just as The Same Boat depicts a man falling irrationally and impulsively in love with a mysterious woman, The Implacable Aphrodite displays a man who is reduced to a whimpering idiot when he learns his love interest has chosen to go abroad instead of staying with him. Mr. White is able to disguise his love for Miss Black, until he is confronted with her leaving. He operated under the guise of friendship and appreciation for her artistic talents- she is a sculptor- never allowing her to know the truth of his feelings. However, he also knew that she had many suitors whom she rejected time and time again. Miss Black was not interested in pursuing a committed relationship with Mr. White. When Miss Black reveals that she is sailing for Europe, Mr. White breaks down and begs her to think of him and what effect her leaving will have on him. Eventually he agrees to leave the apartment, but states that he will be leaving his heart with her in the apartment, she responds with: “Pray don’t. I have room for nothing more in the apartment” (Boyd 53). This implies that she has no interest in ever returning his affection for her.

Throughout the scene, Mr. White is trying to retain some semblance of masculinity. He compliments her beauty, but praises Miss Black more for her mind and

work. He states that he had never before been able to have such a good conversation with a woman. He does not communicate his feelings for her until she tells him of her plans to leave. Mr. White does not give in to telling Miss Black his feelings earlier out of his need for control. Even when he is faced with her departure, he never says he will miss her or good luck with her work, which would be a more acceptable reaction from a friend, he jumps into a monologue asking what effect will this have on me? She should not be expected to worry what effect her voyage should have on him, because to her knowledge they are friends not lovers, and he has never intimated otherwise and if he had she had already made it clear a romantic partnership was out of the question. Miss Black could not have been more honest or direct with her wishes, but Mr. White ignored them and it brought about his own heartbreak. However, the clues that this relationship was destined to fail could be seen before the dialogue even began: in the names. It hints that Miss Black, a color often associated with evil would hurt Mr. White, the color of good or purity. From the very beginning it is assumed that in some way Miss Black would play the role of a Femme Fatale, luring a man in only to destroy him. Miss Black lured Mr. White in with her indifference to a committed traditional relationship. When she rejected that possibility, it made him want it more until he was obsessed and nearly violent. In this instance, Miss Black chose her own needs over the wants and desires over someone else, making her a more traditional Femme Fatale. The image of the Femme Fatale in Millay's and Williams's work is largely defined by a struggle for control and power between men and women.

The reassertion of male control is particularly clear in the ending of Why Marry? by Jesse Lynch Williams and in Aria Da Capo by Edna St. Vincent Millay. In these two

plays, the apparent threat of loss of male control is a major issue as manhood is defined in terms of dominance- not just dominance over the female but over competing males as well (Maxfield 2). In Aria Da Capo, the female lead, Columbine, is stuck in a clearly abusive relationship with a Pierrot. The cyclical style of the piece, closes where it begins- with the couple eating dinner. Pierrot has spent all of his time belittling Columbine to the point that she has a breakdown, yet she continues to return to him, signifying the inability of women to escape from the confines of an oppressive and male dominated society. Williams and Millay each approach the issue of gender dominance in a different way, but the difference between the two is that the male playwright, Williams, ends his works in a male dominant world and Millay does not always hold to the tradition, often allowing for her female heroines/Femme Fatales to upset the status quo as seen in her play The Lamp and The Bell, where there is no longer a man to create a rift between the two sisters. Is it possible to be a Femme Fatale while also encapsulating the traditional role of nurturing woman? Jesse Lynch Williams was able to capture this dichotomy in both Why Marry? as well as in Why Stay Married?. Williams was able to portray a woman who not only wanted to maintain her independence but also wanted to support the man she loved. Helen believed that by not marrying Ernest, it would help both their careers more than if they were married. This would allow both partners to be happy in their work and in love, where as a marriage would create an imbalance of power because Ernest would still be her boss at work and her husband, thus in societal views he would be the one in control of every aspect of their relationship. In Williams's other play, Why Stay Married? Leonard has been a highly unsuccessful poet while married to Mary, however when he divorces her and marries Evadne, his career turns

around and he becomes a success. Evadne was the one who suggested divorce first because she was unhappy with her first husband. The key point to take from Why Stay Married?, is that it doesn't always matter if a person is in a relationship or not, it depends on the couple as a whole. If both parties are working together, the union will be much happier than if one is trying to constantly control the other.

In Millay's work, The Lamp and the Bell, the strong dominant sister loses her fiancé to her more feminine "weak" sister because the man feels like he can better protect and take care of her than he possibly could of a woman who appears to be able to take care of herself. Mary Ann Doane in her book *Femmes Fatales*, argues that "her power is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her own conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity. She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its carrier." (Doane 2) The character's "ambivalence" is what creates a sense of vulnerability. It is this quality of perceived weakness that draws men in. Femme Fatales have been present in folklore, myth, and biblical studies for as far back as human history records. But these women always have a perceived weakness to them that keeps their male infatuated. A true Femme Fatale is not weak in any way, but rather her power comes from her ability to let her vulnerability shine through. She is eradicated either through death, punishment, or in some case marriage, thus negating her power all together. The textual eradication of a Femme Fatale is a reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject. Punishing the woman in either text or on film, allows for the male subject to regain control by implying that no matter what she does, a man will always be the one to dominate. A Femme Fatale is not meant to be the subject of feminism but is merely a

symptom of male fears about feminism (Doane 3).

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when feminism was starting to rise and women were finding independence in society, playwrights who wanted to touch on the subject would tread lightly. Williams, in his Pulitzer Prize winning play, Why Marry? chose to create a woman who rejects the idea of marriage but still longs to commit to a man, nearly driving her paramour crazy. Her rejection of a prior suitor drove him straight into the arms of her younger, more naïve and hapless sister, in hopes of making his original love jealous. The Femme Fatales in works by feminist or female writers are strong decision makers. They know what is best for them and what will make them happiest. For although a Femme Fatale is often characterized by her inability to follow through on action, she generally has already made the decision in her mind as to what she wants. She is simply using her female wiles in order to persuade her partner or victim that they share the same desires. However, in a case like Why Marry? Helen's plan backfires and the heroine finds herself married despite her efforts to avoid marriage completely. Therefore what has the Femme Fatale been as a cultural figure or formation? In order to understand her better it is necessary to take her out of the landscape created by Film Noir and look at how she is still relevant in this era of post-feminism, and to examine the processes of feminist conceptions of the past and the historical development of the Femme Fatales (Hanson 214).

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

In Why Marry? Helen has developed a close relationship with her brother and sought his approval more than that of her sister-in-law Lucy. Lucy had not married for love and firmly believed that the only thing that mattered in a marriage was to be provided for. In Millay's The Lamp and The Bell, Rose Red lost her father at a young age and was raised under her stepmother, who was more focused on raising her own daughter (Rose White). These women are like the New Woman in that they organize their lives around the masculine principles and by allowing themselves to be internally driven by a masculine mode. Helen sacrificed her days of luncheons and shopping for a career because she was bored and thought science to be important. Rose Red adopts a masculine persona in order to be more respected as the leader of a kingdom. She did not want her sex to signify weakness therefore she strengthened her hunting and riding skills, dresses like a man, and never marries. For the 'New Woman' this is extremely influential in how she will develop romantic relationships. She must be allowed to have a personal set of values, separate from her romantic partner, or she will resent him. However, the basic struggle between the sexes comes down to a struggle for power and control. What both the Femme Fatale and the New Woman have in common is that they both know what is best for them and are willing to sacrifice to meet their individual goals, even if it means at the expense of marriage and family. The Naked and Famous, a popular band,



released the song Girls Like You, in which the singer asks “Don’t you know people write songs about girls like you?” It is not a love song, it is not a song about heartbreak, or lost love, but it is an open letter to a Femme Fatale. A woman who goes after what she wants, she doesn’t stop because she is told no, she is beautiful, and she is unapologetic for being who she is, which the singer finds threatening to his role in the relationship and in turn threatens to leave her. Femme Fatales will always have a place in art, music, theatre, and film, as long as women make the conscious decision to be in charge of their own futures. It is precisely this struggle and who comes out victorious, that dictates if the woman will be categorized a Femme Fatale or if she will define a new term in the course of history, just as the New Woman did in the 1920s.

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